

believe, in 1976 Senator Don Dworak of Columbus decided to sponsor the bill that created the habitat program and in July 1 of 1977, some 14 years ago, the program was passed and implemented. And the program basically provides for three categories to be covered by the funds. The first is the habitat protection or improvement on private lands. The second was the acquisition of wildlife lands. And the third was habitat improvement and management on commission control of wildlife areas as well as other public lands not controlled by the commission. The habitat program has generated about \$15.6 million over that 14-year period. That is roughly 58.5 percent of the total funds that are put into the habitat program. The other is coming from federal aid reimbursement of about 10.1 or 38 percent, and then interest on the money as well as gifts provided to the commission, totaling approximately \$919,000 or 3.4 percent of the income. As I said, most of the program has been devoted toward private lands, habitat programs, landowner payments, commission shares, wildlife land acquisitions, habitat improvements, habitat management, payment in lieu of taxes. The program, I guess, one could ask themselves is...has the program helped either slow the decline of habitat or actually help bring about an increase in habitat in Nebraska. Well, I'm not sure that we can answer that fairly without taking a look at a number of other factors beyond the habitat program, such as weather, such as the farm program, for example, the wetlands issue. But I would say that the reason for the increase seems to be that the department would like to continue the program, one; to try and basically make improvements on the land as well as purchase more wetlands, as they have told us, since that is an area of concern for them, to hopefully continue to study the decline in habitat. And that is, as I said, that is the reason for the bill. There has been no adjustment in this fee since 19...since the inception of the program in 1977. That's 14 years ago. And this is the first time that the commission has had a chance to get the bill on the floor and be heard. It was introduced before the committee last year. It was advanced out of committee last year but unfortunately, due to time, it was not brought up on the floor and so we're bringing it to you today in hopes of advancing the bill and continuing what I think is a worthy program to assist the habitat of our state.

SPEAKER BAACK: Thank you, Senator Johnson. Before we proceed to the next speaker on the list, I would like to introduce some guests of mine. Under the south balcony, my parents are there,